

VZCZCXYZ0000  
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTU #0060/01 0261557  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
P 261557Z JAN 10  
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7199  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY  
RUEWMFD/USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE PRIORITY  
INFO RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000060

SIPDIS

HQ AFRICOM FOR DCMA AMB HOLMES AND SPP FOR MG SHERLOCK

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/25/2020  
TAGS: [MARR](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: AFRICOM DEPUTY MEETS NEW TUNISIAN DEFENSE MINISTER  
RIDHA GRIRA

Classified By: Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: The U.S. Africa Command,s Deputy to the Commander for Civil Military Activities (DCMA), Ambassador J. Anthony Holmes, met new Tunisian Minister of National Defense Ridha Grira on January 21, one week after the latter,s appointment. The new minister was friendly and emphasized the oft-heard Tunisian commitment to strong bilateral relations with the U.S.; he said more than once that he looked forward to the Joint Military Commission meeting in Washington at the end of April. However, despite urging from Ambassador Holmes for increased engagement and greater openness on Tunisia's capabilities and needs, Grira did not address possible increased engagement or information exchange, noting the need for the government to balance its commitments to civilian needs as well. Grira asked for peacekeeping training. When Ambassador Holmes noted continued USG interest in a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), Grira replied that the GOT was waiting for a response to its language change requests from 2008. End summary.

12. (C) For his first meeting with the U.S. as Defense Minister, Grira decided to have all his Chiefs of Staff attend, as opposed to having Ambassador Holmes meet each separately, as had been the plan when the meeting was scheduled with his predecessor, Kamel Morjane. Attending from the Tunisian side were Major General Rachid Ammar, Chief of Staff of the Army; Rear Admiral Tarek Faouzi El Arbi, Chief of Staff of the Navy; Colonel Major Taieb Laajimi, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Colonel Major Mohamed Ghorbel, the Defense Ministry's Director of Cooperation and International Relations, and Captain Major Mohamed Khammassi, advisor to the Minister of Defense for International Relations. From the U.S. side, Ambassadors Holmes and Gray were accompanied by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Talley, Executive Officer to Ambassador Holmes; Commander Doug Poole, Political-Military Chief for the North Africa Engagement Division at AFRICOM; Christine Castro, Executive Officer to the AFRICOM Political Advisor, as well as the Deputy Chief of the Embassy,s Office of Security Cooperation (notetaker).

-----  
COMMITTED TO RELATIONS WITH THE U.S., BUT NO EXPANSION  
-----

13. (C) Speaking in French, Grira restated the words regularly heard from the Tunisian leadership, emphasizing President Ben Ali,s commitment to continued strong relations with the U.S. Anticipating the U.S. points, he said he knew the U.S. wanted to expand military engagement and emphasized Tunisia,s commitment to the military role in counterterrorism and defending freedom and democracy. However, he pointed out that Tunisia also had a commitment to counter poverty, develop its financial institutions, and strengthen good governance. He also raised the issue of

Tunisia,s need to balance its friendship with the U.S. with the need to maintain good relations with its neighbors.

14. (C) Ambassador Holmes, while reassuring the Minister of the United States, commitment to Tunisia, emphasized that in the current economic environment, Congress was looking closely at spending. For Tunisia to continue receiving high levels of assistance, Congress would need to see concrete benefits coming from the assistance, to include a willingness to increase engagement, particularly in the realm of counterterrorism, and more openness in terms of letting the U.S. know what Tunisia,s long-term objectives are for its military and how the U.S. could help meet these objectives. The DCMA emphasized that point again to the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Colonel Major Laajmi, during the MOD-hosted lunch the following day, who responded that the GOT was focused on the April JMC in that regard.

15. (C) Griira said "message understood" once Ambassador Holmes finished his opening remarks, but assured him that Tunisia,s commitment to the relationship with the U.S. was deeper than just the amount of military assistance it was receiving; that it was based on shared interests and principles and that it would continue regardless of what Congress decided in terms of FMF level. Despite this, he did ask that Ambassador Holmes defend Tunisia,s case for maintaining current assistance levels.

16. (C) Ambassador Holmes complimented Tunisia on its approach to addressing social ills. Describing the conversations he had the day before while visiting two U.S. military humanitarian assistance financed facilities run by the Association of Parents of Handicapped in Tunisia (APAHT), he

commented that this level of social assistance does not exist elsewhere in Africa. Griira stated that under President Ben Ali education of all types has taken priority. The GOT belief is that the best way to combat terrorism is through education.

-----  
International Engagement  
-----

17. (C) Thanking the Minister for Tunisia,s participation in the United Nations Mission in Congo (MONUC), Ambassador Holmes stated that the training of the Congolese Army is very important to stabilizing that region. MG Ammar stated that Tunisia,s contribution to MONUC is a battalion of 500 soldiers. Griira asked if the U.S. could assist in training and equipping Tunisian peacekeeping forces, but was told that while the U.S. was providing Scan Eagle Unmanned Aerial Vehicles to Tunisia using Peacekeeping funds, there were no current initiatives to train or equip Tunisia,s peacekeepers.

18. (C) As the meeting drew to a close, Ambassador Holmes asked Griira if he had any particular concerns. Griira responded that he had no special security concerns, but one must always be vigilant. The security situation is helped by Tunisia,s strong relations with its neighbors, which Griira attributed to President Ben Ali,s friendship with both President Gaddafi of Libya and President Bouteflika of Algeria. Ambassador Holmes used this opening to encourage Tunisia,s involvement in multilateral exercises and organizations, stating his belief that the best way to handle security threats was through broad regional cooperation.

19. (C) As they stood up to depart, the DCMA told the Defense Minister that the U.S. was still interested in establishing a SOFA for U.S. military forces in Tunisia and that Congress considers a SOFA very important in judging the strength of a relationship. Griira said that he was aware of the issue, but that the Tunisians were waiting for the U.S. to respond to their proposal for text changes. (Comment: The last engagement on this issue was in 2008. End comment.)

-----  
Comment

-----

¶10. (C) Despite being only a week in the job, Minister Grira appeared relaxed, confident, and friendly in the meeting. Although the discussions broke no new ground, we hope that his reassurances of Tunisia,s commitment to the bilateral relationship mean that we will continue to have reasonably good access to, and cooperation with, the new Defense Minister. One area to watch is his relationship with the Chiefs of Staff, who were all but silent during the meeting. While this could be indicative of a Defense Minister who wants to keep a tighter rein on his subordinates, it more likely reflects that the Minister and the Chiefs of Staff are trying to get used to each other just six days after he formally took over. Finally, Ambassador Holmes understood the Air Force Chief,s reference to the GOT,s focus on the JMC to be a direct response to his urging the minister the previous day to deepen Tunisian engagement in our bilateral mil-mil cooperation. End comment.

¶11. (U) Ambassador Holmes has cleared this cable.  
GRAY